Stefan Selke  *Editor*

# Lifelogging

Digital self-tracking and
Lifelogging – between
disruptive technology
and cultural transformation

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With the collaboration of Philipp Klose

Springer VS

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# Deathlogging: Social Life Beyond the Grave

## The Post-Mortem Uses of Social Networking Sites

Hélène Bourdeloie and Martin Julier-Costes

"*Lifelogging*" refers to the saving and archiving of data concerning one's own life. With the rise of online social platforms, this practice is very much on the increase. Echoing this trend, questions now arise about the status and future of post-mortem digital identity in the experience of the bereaved. These are questions underpinning an ongoing research project in France[1] that we are currently working on and which forms basis of the present study.

In France, there have been relatively few studies on the persistence of these online "traces" of deceased Internet users, be it the automatic messages from their email account or Facebook profile or those sent by close friends and family to their account or profile, the creation of dedicated websites (blogs, virtual cemeteries, memorial websites, etc.), the uses of such post-mortem social data and the way these affect the mourning process. Although the literature on the subject abounds, notably across the Atlantic (Bubaker and Vertesi 2010; Brubaker and Hayes 2011; Brubaker et al. 2012; etc.), this paucity of studies likely hangs on the fact that digi-

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tal platforms dedicated to mourning and remembrance are a recent phenomenon in France,[2] where death has long been a taboo subject (Clavandier 2009).

In the Anglo-Saxon world, many authors (Brubaker and Hayes 2011; Walter et al. 2011) have observed that "SNSs [social networking sites] provide a platform both to express grief and by which survivors can maintain connections with the deceased" (Brubaker and Hayes 2011). In line with these works—and contrary to the writings of the French anthropologist L-V. Thomas (1975) and others who uphold the theory of the social denial of death (Ariès 1982; Lafontaine 2008)—we contend that, far from inducing anonymity, digital media highlight the individuality of the deceased and make mourning visible in the shared arena of cyberspace. This allows the living to ensure a continuing relationship with the dead, in a context where the overriding sentiment is one of loss.

In Western society, where people are hyper-connected and individualism is more forcefully expressed, the question of deathlogging (i.e. the digital persistence of deceased persons) and the uses of the data related to post-mortem digital identity are felt all the more keenly. On the basis of preliminary results from some ten interviews[3] with deceased persons' family and friends, as well as observations of their digital traces,[4] we first explore how technical innovations such as memorial websites, SNS memorial accounts, etc. affect the mourning process and enable the bereaved to re-establish a relation with the dead. More specifically, we show that with the use of social networking—which provides a framework conducive to the expression of both private and communal grief—death has ceased to be distant. In fact, as the deceased is digitally present, social networking sites help to combine mourning and mourning rituals with everyday rituals. The former are being integrated into a ritualized quotidian (Javeau 2006) and thus the dividing lines between the sacred and the profane are being redefined. Secondly, we describe the three broad categories of use and non-use that we have identified, but present them here as exploratory findings.

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2    According to our 1999 research, the first web-based initiative affecting mourning practices was implemented by Monegasque funeral-home owner who developed funeral services in France so as to avoid the high cost of such services in Monaco. Memorial websites such as virtual cemeteries only made their appearance about ten years later.

3    These interviews, which are part of an ongoing project, were conducted in several cities in France from October 2013 to November 2014.

4    The bereaved accepted us as "friends" so that we could log on to the pages dedicated to the deceased.

# 1       Mourning and Online practices

Before we proceed with our analysis, it must be understood that we view the relationship between technology and society as being mutually constructed rather than deterministic. This means that digital technologies *per se* do not modify the relationship to mourning or to the associated social rituals. Likewise, social structures do not determine the configuration or functional framework of socio-technology. In light of this, what needs to be taken into account is the social and technological context in which online social platforms emerge, as well as the appearance of *sui generis* practices. These practices are developing in modern post-industrial societies, where social structures are fragmented (Walter 2007) and where traditional socialization frameworks are less influential (Giddens 1991) as they are now in competition with a growing individualism. Such conditions are conducive to a process of individuation that enables the individual, more cut off from tradition, to construct his or her identity (ibid.) and establish social ties more freely. To fully understand these new online mourning practices, the specific social, cultural and religious contexts of the society in which the mourning takes place must be taken into consideration. As T. Walter (2007) has shown, mourning practices are more private in some societies, in England for example, and more collective in more traditional societies such as Japan. These practices are not only culturally rooted but also historically contextualized at a demographic, social, and technological level (Walter 2013). The author identifies four broad developments in mourning practices in the Western world: in the first pre-industrial phase, grieving is shared among members of the family and local community; in the 20th century, the expression of grief becomes a private matter; then, in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, grieving becomes public, with mass media coverage in the case of celebrity deaths, although for the bereaved themselves the actual experience of grief remains intimate and private. Finally, in the recent age of Web 2.0 technology, the pain of grief is once again shared and can be lived in both a private and collective manner.

## 1.1     Death in the Digital Era: visibility replaces denial

In Western societies, death has been a long-standing taboo. According to the anthropologist L-V. Thomas (1975) and the historian P. Ariès (1982), death has been the object of denial. In other words, death has been separated from daily life and de-ritualized, chiefly due to the increasing pace of scientific progress and the decline of religious practices. A similar reasoning holds that other phenomena have also contributed to this denial of death: urbanization has weakened social ties and

the sense of identity, homogenized certain values, diversified the locales associated with dying (home, hospital, crematorium, funeral home, etc.) and led to a form of anonymity (Elias 2001). The conjunction of the de-ritualization and de-socialization of death has led to the "privatization" of grieving and thus to the elimination of all visible signs of death. This death-denial thesis persists, especially in France, but is nonetheless being challenged. Although many researchers still point out the disappearance of "traditional" mourning rituals and the collective management of the symbolic and sacred aspects of mourning, others note that such rituals have shifted ground (Walter 1991; Déchaux 1997; Clavandier 2009; Julier-Costes 2011; Roudaut 2012), changed form (Péruchon 1997; Déchaux 1997) or been created afresh as in the context of AIDS for instance (Broqua and Loux 1999). Alongside religious actors, other actors such as funeral professionals (Bernard 2009) and professional careers (Schepens 2013) played an increasingly important role during the 20th century. As a result, they have been instrumental in redefining the French social, cultural and religious context that frames the experience of grieving, with online social platforms now also contributing to the redefinition of this experience. As these have brought death back onto the social stage, they encourage tighter bonds between the bereaved and their departed close family or friends (Brubaker et al. 2012; Church 2013; Walter 2013) and reconfigure the relationship to former mourning practices, which were frowned upon and seen as morbid (Clavandier 2009). This prompts us to reconsider the thesis of the social denial of death, as the Internet is clearly a space for the *mise en scène* and celebration of the deceased (memorial pages, virtual cemeteries, video tributes on Dailymotion or YouTube) and where messages from the living to the dead are made visible. Far from making the deceased anonymous, these online social platforms help to make them unique, operating the logic already at work in their socio-technical framework. This framework is basically expressive, as in the case of SNS memorial pages or participative virtual cemeteries, and thus encourages expressivism[5] (Allard 2008): through their actions, the living contribute to performing both their own identity and the post-mortem digital identity of the deceased. Moreover, online social platforms help to restructure the mourning process insofar as they transform the rituals for separation from the dead and the painful experience of death. Yet, they also complicate the "mourning process" in that they create mourning rituals that are embedded in the rituals of everyday life; messages from the living in tribute to

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[5]    The term "expressivism" appears in the works Laurence Allard, in France, who drew inspiration from the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor (*Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*, 1989) concerning the origins of contemporary individualism, especially the expressivist current of the Romantic period.

the deceased arrive in our inboxes along with other emails. In fact, just as many studies on Internet usage produce conflicting results—for example, some studies on social bonding find increasing social isolation in the social Web age, whereas others observe the increasing size of social networks (Grossetti 2014)—research results concerning online mourning rituals also come up with conflicting findings. For instance, SNSs can have a function of resilience and provide some people with a comforting presence and a way of working through their grief—which means facing the reality of death and expressing their grief in line with the cultural context to which they belong (Baudry 2003)—whereas for other people, the SNSs actually hinder mourning and prolong grief (Brubaker and Hayes 2011). Another point of divergence concerns the phenomenon of individuation, which some authors associate with death-related practices (Walter 1994; Green 2008). For T. Walter, these practices are individualized and "intimized": the role of the community and traditional ritual declines (Walter 1994). Intimacy replaces community and, as rituals are erased, grief becomes difficult to express (ibid.). This analysis is in line with the theories that affirm a growing individualism in our modern post-industrial societies and highlight its beneficial side (Giddens 1992). However, when analyzed in light of social networking, this type of diagnosis is not entirely robust. Online social platforms, be they generalist SNSs like Facebook or memorial websites, allow for public expression of grief since, like a grave, they enable death to be individualized within a collective, shared space such as a Facebook or MySpace profile[6] (Brubaker and Vartesi 2010; Brubaker and Hayes 2011). Indeed, many studies (ibid., Church 2013) have shown that SNSs enable grieving to be experienced both privately and collectively, and even at a community level: "Interactive Web 2.0 social network sites (SNSs) have enabled mourning once again to become a community rather than a private experience—for both better and worse" (Walter 2013). Since SNSs heighten the presence of death, it is no longer possible to make it a taboo topic. As these sites encourage expression, they enable the bereaved to express themselves freely and subjectively, given that mourning rituals are no longer a collective matter as they are in traditional mourning practices.

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6   Before Facebook introduced memorial accounts, MySpace created MyDeathSpace. com in January 2006, with a map of the United States marking all deceased users' MySpace accounts. Most of them mark the tragic deaths of young individuals. Visitors can follow links to articles, photographs or commentaries to learn about the circumstances of a death (cf. http://www.salon.com/2007/07/31/deathspace/). On this count, Mydeathspace.com and Facebook are digital "*memento mori*" reminding Internet users of their own mortality.

## 1.2    Post-mortem digital existence in question

In hyper-connected societies, the usage of digital technology is difficult to avoid. Since digital technology incorporates traceability functionalities and most people now have traces on the Web, sometimes against their wishes, post-mortem digital life is becoming a salient issue. Moreover, as online practices now support the West's cultural, informational, relational and leisure practices, the use of digital technology when someone dies is almost impossible to avoid, if only for practical reasons (e.g. death announcements: Pène 2011). During one's lifetime, online self-exposition has become so ubiquitous that people who are invisible on the Web become suspect. The self-exposition made possible by online social platforms has radically changed the cleavage between the public and private realms. As Cardon (2009) states: "from being interpersonal and secret, private communication becomes public" (Cardon 2009), as do the boundaries of intimacy for the living (Tisseron 2001; Cauquelin 2003). In fact, these platforms are helping to redefine the intimate—which is not to be confused with the private, as intimacy is a social construct (Baudry 2010). This is also the case for the frontiers between life and death (Schepens 2013), which become more blurred with SNSs as these tend to cloud the reality of a loved one's death. This is even more true when a person's death has not been reported to the digital platform, which is programmed to invite family and friends to interact with the deceased (cf. infra). Moreover, given that any publicized digital trace concerning the deceased could prompt anyone who so wishes to take on management of the symbolic (e.g. when a dead person's cyber account is kept open for tributes), digital media re-introduce mourning into social life and help to shift the dividing lines that formerly set apart what was taboo. These online platforms also transform the frontiers of mourning rituals insofar as their ubiquity now means that death is no longer assigned a specific status or specific location (Clavandier 2009) as in the past. In fact, whatever happens to a deceased's digital data, their traceability has an impact on the memorializing process (Merzeau 2014) and the social mourning process (Wright 2014), given that family and friends cannot overlook this traceability. On the one hand, the so-called "right to be forgotten" (i.e. the possibility for Internet users to have their personal Web-indexed data deleted during their life time) also applies to deceased persons. For living users, removing such traces requires determination, money and know-how (Merzeau 2014), and the same is true for the deceased person's family and friends. They are obliged to give the Web service providers proof of their relationship with the deceased in order to have his or her traces removed. Besides, the question of legal ownership of digital assets is a salient issue. In France, the Commission Nationale de l'Informatique et des Libertés (CNIL), whose role is to protect per-

sonal data and individual liberties in the digital world on French territory, is not authorized to bequeath digital assets: "The law does not provide for the transfer of the deceased's rights to his or her heirs: an heir cannot therefore, under the Data Protection and Civil Liberties Act, have access to a deceased person's data. The law, however, authorizes the heirs to take steps to update information concerning the deceased (registering the death, for example)" (CNIL 2013, p. 74). If a deceased user has made no provisions, the CNIL moreover recalls that it has no "remit to arbitrate the balance that must be found between the need to delete all traces of post-mortem identity and the wish to reach digital immortality by continuing to keep the identity alive beyond death" (CNIL 2013, p. 74). This question of "digital death" has nonetheless been taken in hand by the major Internet companies. Facebook pioneered reflection on the subject by creating memorial accounts in 2009 and several other Web companies have since followed suit. Google, for instance, has launched an "Inactive Account Manager" permitting an entire account and its contents to be bequeathed to a third party. In this area, the Internet companies generally prefer to abide by the legally recognized principle of filiation—most often biological—, without taking into account[7] either the deceased's personal wishes or the fact that the latter would not necessarily have shared their intimacy—as they do on SNSs—with their heirs; family ties and emotional ties do not always coincide. The deceased would not necessarily have wished for what often serves as a digital personal diary to be communicated to their heirs. Besides, this legacy may be disturbing for some of the bereaved should the family decide to delete the deceased user's account, thus removing all of their conversation threads and group of friends. Conversely, keeping a deceased user's traces may also be disturbing if the heirs transform his or her Facebook account into a memorial account. Indeed, this situation limits postings to those who were already his or her Facebook "friends", and digital friendship networks do not always reflect traditional friendships.

On the other hand, if the bereaved take no action to remove the deceased's digital identity, either because the procedures are not known or filiation is unsubstantiated, they will have to resignedly accept this digital persistence. They may then

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7   Facebook states: "After someone has passed away, we'll memorialize their account if a family member or friend submits a request" via a completed form. Proof of death is said to be optional. However, in the cases we studied, it was the family that requested the deletion or memorialization of the account. In fact, users are not always aware of this option (half of the respondents were unaware of this). And when friends are cognizant, they sometimes feel that they cannot legitimately make the request. Finally, we were unable to carry out a test as we did not know anyone who had died, but many press articles circulating on the Web give mixed opinions on the subject, some affirming that only deceased's beneficiaries can make this request.

be exposed to the violence of programmed algorithms that often fail to distinguish between living and dead users. One case in point is Facebook's "Year In Review" app, which proposes its users a review of their year 2014 in selected moments they shared on their profile and which extracted the photo of one user's daughter who had died a few months earlier.[8] Similarly, some still "active" profiles,[9] continue to exist as if the user were still alive. This creates a somewhat strange situation as Facebook proposes sending out a friend request to a deceased person, reminds us of their birthday or suggests that we insert a photo of our profile following a friend request to the deceased. For example, a banner at the top of our Facebook account says "Help Vincent Guilpin [deceased] to recognise you". These examples illustrate the unease that mourners may feel (Pène 2011) and also point to a potential clash between the actual reality they experience and what algorithmic reality shows them—which fuels tensions between technology and human sensibility (Dauphine et al. 2014). The question thus arises here of confronting practices that are *a priori* conflicting: on one hand, the relationship to the pain of grief; on the other, the relationship to technology, seen as inhuman, "cold" and governed by computation.

## 2　　Reconfiguring the mourning process in the digital age: disconnecting and online practices connecting with the dead

In order to better understand online practices of the bereaved regarding their deceased loved ones, this study has identified three different types of memorial sites: a group of sites memorialize the deceased (virtual cemeteries); a second group of sites enabling changes to the deceased user's pages (e.g. Facebook's memorial accounts) and a third group of sites that allow individuals to prepare "their digital legacy" during their lifetime (last message service, digital locker, etc.) (Georges and Julliard 2014). Drawing on this typology and the fact that uses also depend on a platform's affordances and presentation options and formats, we focus here on the first two groups of websites. On the basis of our preliminary observations, we were able to identify three broad types of use and non-use: disconnecting with the deceased or the removal of his or her traces (1), creating

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8　　Peterson A. (2014) Facebook's 'Year in Review' app swings from merely annoying to tragic. The Washington Post. http://urlz.fr/1pUB. Accessed 03 Dec 2015.

9　　Deceased's profile: https://www.facebook.com/vincent.guilpin.

specialist online memorial spaces (2) and setting up new digital-age mourning rituals and forms of expression (3).

## 2.1    Disconnecting with the deceased and removing their traces

Swamped by prompts from social networking sites to log on and provide identity data or simply preferring traditional mourning rituals, people may choose to disconnect (Jauréguiberry 2014). Disconnecting is to be understood here in different ways: suffering from the effects of "generalized connection", mourners may deliberately decide "to limit the negative effects by not using the Web" (ibid.). But they may also wish to disconnect more specifically from the deceased and erase his or her digital presence. In the first case, this may involve wanting to escape the everyday routine of information and communication technologies, which epitomize the materialistic side of life, in order to engage in more spiritual forms of mourning. In the second case, disconnecting with the deceased may involve removing all of their digital traces (Facebook account with its list of friends, telephone numbers, emails, text messages, etc.). Indeed, digital and mourning practices do not necessarily go hand in hand. The discourse of some respondents sometimes reveals a hierarchy between traditional and online mourning practices: the first belonging to the sacred sphere and the second to the profane. This is what is in question when the bereaved wish to remove the deceased person's digital traces or, when unable to do so, they prefer to avoid all digital traces of the person. The reasons may be religious (e.g. human representation is not accepted in Islam). They may also relate to ritual or tradition in the sense that some respondents think that online mourning practices cannot replace traditional practices. Although the two types of rituality are complementary, the importance of digital forms can nonetheless be observed (Odom et al. 2010; Wright 2014).

### Mixing the sacred and the profane

As hybrid spaces, online social platforms not initially designed for memorial purposes bring together the realms of the sacred and profane, a mixture of genres that poses an obstacle for family and friends who sometimes resist using memorial SNSs. As the comments posted there sometimes evoke a mundane and materialistic world, they may seem at odds with life beyond the grave and the sacred dimension of death. The interviews and observations of the accounts also bring to light an expiatory exuberance. Objections are voiced regarding the excessive nature of some

postings that resemble a show of suffering or exercises in hyperbole (e.g. poetic messages) or, on the other hand, the "obscene" or "disrespectful" (sic) nature of others. For some respondents, this online posting can turn into a "competition". Judith[10] (student, age 24), for instance, deliberately deleted her friend's Facebook account from her list of friends three months after his death; the excessive messaging on the deceased's account placed her in an awkward position: "for me (…) I found it totally bizarre (…) to post messages on his wall when he was dead (…) it was a bit like an outpouring (…) I had the impression that there was a sort of competition to see who could be the saddest, who would be the most unhappy after Vincent's death". Sofiane (advertising space seller, age 26) also deliberately stopped connecting to the profile of a friend who had died in Australia, with the same feeling that there was a show of sadness that initially gives solace but then quickly places the bereaved in an awkward situation. Talking about his friend's Facebook account and the many messages posted after his death, Sofiane explains: "At the very beginning, me, I thought it was fine, it enabled me to meet lots of people on Facebook (…) to see lots of solicitations, positive sentences (…)  When I began to notice this one-upmanship for sadness, me, I felt disgusted and at that point, didn't go onto his Facebook account any more, and also because it was hard for me to grieve because of this bullshit (…) So of course, to make things clearer, it wasn't easy with Facebook (…) at that point, I saw the unhealthy side of it". Yet, this excessive sadness, judged as inappropriate by some respondents, is not unlike the highly ostentatious codes formerly observed for funerals in France with their public, grandiose and demonstrative ceremony (Clavandier 2009). The show of grief on SNSs is also reminiscent of the social dimension of mourning—as it was at least until the 1960s (ibid.). This social and expressive dimension is reinforced by online platforms, which make mourning a public affair (Walter et al. 2011). The comments of a 23-year-old student who had lost her younger sister concur with this view: "(…) we removed it last year. When she died, we wanted to remove it, but (…) people in her class had just posted some supportive messages for my family and me and they put prayers on: the teachers also left messages there. So we decided to leave it, it was comforting (…). After, it started to run out of steam, nobody was posting messages and even though it was comforting at the beginning, it was preventing us from moving on to other things, especially my mother". These accounts confirm that online memorial spaces may have the effect of prolonging grief (Brubaker and Hayes 2011). On the other hand, these new online rituals clearly have a cathartic function, akin to the rituals of the past (Clavandier 2009). These users' behavior thus needs to be interpreted in the light of the grieving process as an act of sepa-

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10    We have used fictitious names for the respondents.

ration. At the outset, we see the deceased persons' accounts are very "active" following their death or when calendar events such as birthdays or death anniversaries come round; and that postings fall off over time, a trend that concurs with previous research findings (Brubaker and Hayes 2011). But it is tempting to interpret this diminishing number of postings with respect to the "nature" of SNSs, where the on-screen presentation positions posters within a logic of calculation, showiness and output (Cardon 2009). It is equally tempting to examine the production of tributes in relation to a form of narcissism, self-measurement and personal performance. When mourners make themselves visible by posting tributes and a proliferation of comments praising the deceased, not only are they keeping the post-mortem digital identities alive, particularly the "acting identity" (Georges 2011) through the traffic on the account, but they are also constructing their own identity.

## Biological death as opposed to the social persistence of post-mortem digital identity

The reasons for not using digital technologies in a mourning context may also depend on the painful feelings elicited by a post-mortem digital identity. The deceased person exists on-screen in texts, images, sounds and "movements" due to the traffic generated on memorial spaces, whether or not these are specialist sites. While this gives the impression that the person is continually active (Brubaker and Vertesi 2010), this presence can never replace the physical presence of the living person. In fact, the hardship stems from having to come to terms with the separation due to biological death and, at the same time, adapt to digital immortality, should digital traces persist and adversely affect mourners not "authorized" to remove them. As Web technologies affect social and not biological death (Odom et al. 2010; Walter et al. 2011), the bereaved are left with the feeling that they can socialize with the deceased eternally. Christine (age 53, currently unemployed) cannot bring herself to visit the Facebook profile of her daughter, who committed suicide at the age of fifteen, even though the profile is extremely active being regularly updated via messages from friends. Finding it too "alive", the respondent chose to unsubscribe from the news feed of her daughter's friends, using Facebook's "Unfollow" option to stop receiving messages about her deceased daughter: "I removed them from my news feed (…) because, well, it's too painful for me. So I never go and look at their walls". Likewise, she no longer visits the public page created by friends as a tribute.[11] To avoid mixing genres and the dissonance between

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11    cf. http://urlz.fr/1pVf. All the account profiles studied were in French (some had comments posted in Arabic).

a person's biological death and their still active digital account, others choose to create dedicated memorial sites. These may be of three types according to the typology referred to earlier: websites allowing tributes to the deceased, that is, virtual cemeteries; existing profiles transformed into a memorial account as in the case of Facebook,[12] or community pages dedicated to the deceased via Facebook.

## 2.2     Creation of online dedicated memorial spaces: faithfulness to the deceased and semantic concordance

As composite spaces mixing different registers of information and communication, online social platforms provide an opportunity for irruptive expression, as symptomized by postings of an insulting nature. Thus some intimates create memorial spaces dedicated to the deceased, which can thus often serve to ease the tensions that sometimes underlie the management of post-mortem digital traces.

### Arenas for expression and ad hoc rules of conduct

These spaces may be virtual cemeteries or Facebook accounts changed into memorials. We met one respondent (office worker, age 38) through the Paradis Blanc memorial website,[13] where condolences can be posted, memories shared and virtual candles lit on the deceased's page. Having lost his 17-year-old son to leukemia, he describes how he chose to turn his son's Facebook account into a memorial account so that only his "friends" could post messages and also to avoid any unwelcome and "disrespectful" (sic) intrusions: "At first, we wanted to leave his account open as we were getting lots of messages of support from his classmates, but little by little, people we didn't know sent negative messages telling us that he wasn't the first person to die of leukemia so there was no need to make such a fuss. We didn't get many but even so, it hurts (…). And worse, his girlfriend had created a blog to pay him tribute, but a few weeks later, people came to make jokes and laugh at those who were leaving messages of support. It was really shocking and my wife suffered a lot because of this". Another woman respondent (office worker, age 40), who had lost her 14-year-old daughter, describes what led her to disable her daughter's account, which she could not control and which was deforming her daughter's

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12    When an account becomes a memorial account, it can no longer be modified (it is impossible to add or delete friends), and will no longer appear in public spaces such as suggestions from the user's friends or birthday reminders.

13    www.paradisblanc.com. Accessed 03 Dec 2015.

personality: "My daughter had a Facebook account and it hurt like mad to close it, in the end it didn't correspond to who she was, it ended up being anything and everything, both good and bad". Creating a dedicated space thus makes sense for respondents seeking coherence between sharing the grief of a loved one and the practice of ad hoc rituals. This reminds us that rituals, as Durkheim wrote, are rules of conduct governing how people should act in the presence of things sacred (Durkheim 1912 [1960]). This coherence is indeed what mourners are seeking: "I came across Paradis Blanc by chance[14] (…). There's a serious side to it, there's support among families and you're not alone; it does you good to see someone has written the same thing and that you're not the only one to write what you write". As we have seen, what drives these initiatives is the distinction between the sacred and the profane: escaping the heteroclite behaviors found on SNS sites, which confuse the meanings of messages and detracts from a more fitting spiritual approach. Yet, the creation of such spaces is sometimes problematic for the bereaved in cases where the deceased did not communicate any wishes regarding their digital legacy. How then can one remain true to the deceased's personality and their *desiderata post mortem*? A bereaved mother (office worker, age 40) recounts the dilemma she faced with her daughter's Facebook account after her daughter's death: "My daughter was fourteen and a half. She had a Facebook account like all young girls of her age and I found that she wasn't in her place any more. But I wondered if by disabling her account I might not dispossess myself of what I still had left of her". Here it is a matter of not betraying the deceased person, or at least the post-mortem representation that one constructs for oneself. Certainly, users can challenge message contents if ever these violate the normative codes associated with death. But the ever-present underlying question is how to remain faithful to the deceased's personality, or in other words safeguard their identity or the identity given to them by their close entourage. On this count, Sofia (student, age 24) remarked that a video posted on a group page dedicated to her deceased friend showed the friend singing a song that the deceased's Muslim family viewed as provocative and vulgar. The family was upset about its posting and wanted to remove it. A posting on the wall of the Facebook group's page read:[15] "If you really love LAMINE remove the video that you have posted (…) (just a bit of advice) (…) call on the lord to forgive him (…) and who gives him mercy (…) thank's"). This religious argument was countered by arguing for faithfulness to the deceased and for memory: "A fantastik moment with lamine! We was skipping some lesson or other. Don't regret it today. ♥"; "Not agree with you souhaib this video is a supa memory it brings

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14    www.paradisblanc.com/amandine-blet. Accessed 03 Dec 2015.
15    http://urlz.fr/1pVB. Accessed 03 Dec 2015.

mi a bit of a smile to see him me I loved it lots nostalgia we musnt do without, thts all"[16]). Several testimonies are along similar lines: Claire (cultural mediator, age 32) took offense when one of her cousins posted a photograph of her deceased grandmother after her death, as a tribute on Facebook. This action appeared totally inappropriate to the bereaved given that her grandmother, who was not computer literate, "has nothing to do with Facebook". Faithfulness to the deceased but also respect for their family and friends are part of the recognized conventions in matters of death. This is why a widowed female respondent (communication officer, age 38) expressed her shock at seeing the photograph of her marriage posted on Facebook by her sister-in-law, who on top of that had cut the photograph in two and deleted the bride's body and face.

The other issue involves the legitimacy of addressing the deceased if one was only relatively close to them. Can one express sadness, reveal one's presence in the dedicated digital space or become part of the deceased's intimacy, etc.? Multiple postings by mourners who are not considered to be sufficiently close to the deceased may thus be viewed as indecent. The question of proximity to the deceased person is a recurring issue when it comes to funerals and mourning. Faithfulness to the deceased's personality and the legitimacy of paying tribute to them are intrinsically linked since the mourners' image of the deceased must not be sullied by a dissonant use of their Facebook profile. Thus posting numerous messages that reveal the deceased's personality may not only be at odds with the deceased's personality but also with the way the deceased used their account. In this area, filiation ties appear to be tolerated. One respondent regretted that his late friend's family was using the Facebook profile in a way he considered as inappropriate, but he nonetheless admitted that the deceased's sister talked regularly to her late brother out of "need".

## The creation of online mourning communities

On these spaces, people share the sacred dimension with others who have had a similar experience. The website users clearly state their need to express and share grief on a fitting space: "on this site [Paradis Blanc], there are lots of people who are there for the same reasons as mine; it's a site specifically made for that" (office worker, age 40). In fact, the creation of these spaces is also designed for diasporic uses: maintaining and sharing mourning with bereaved who are spatially dispersed. This use is notably linked to the geographic separation of families

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16    The English translation attempts to reflect the style of the French original. The posters here are Algerian.

and to personal and professional mobility, which implies that the burial site may be far from the place of residence. Research into online social platforms concurs that geographical distance is the most significant variable for the use of this type of platform (Lee et al. 2011). It is one of the reasons that prompted Arielle to create her daughter's profile:[17] "You can visit it without making yourself known; many of our family are far away, so that's why we did it". It is also the case when mourners create a specific online group entirely dedicated to the deceased so as to bear witness to eternal friendship. In this respect, some refer to a "community of mourners" to designate the messages addressed to the deceased on such group pages or profiles. Whether communal in essence or by default, these spaces create new forms of rituals that dovetail to varying extents with traditional rituals.

## 2.3    The *mise en scène* of new rituals and expressions of grief

### The complementarity of digital and traditional mourning rituals

The people interviewed pointed out that, parallel to digital rituals, traditional rituals for the deceased continued without family and friends necessarily taking part. In fact, what is mainly observed is the *mise-en-scène* of diverse kinds if new rituals: the deceased's entourage can pay tribute on the various online social platforms, where one can pay one's respects but also engage in private communing and remembrance: "It is really when I think of him [42-year-old friend who died of brain cancer] (…). I look at his photos, I look at what people put (…) but after a while it makes me want to cry so I stop, and yes that's what I'm looking for in fact (…) Crying (…) is the only time I still think or cry for Antoine, it never happens to me at other times, only when I'm on Facebook." (Isabelle, age 40, tourist agent). Hervé commented: "His grave is five minutes from where I live; I go there much less often than I go on Facebook. Each time I'm on Facebook, I go onto his Facebook to see his photos, see old videos again, to see things on the wall (…). Facebook, it's a new reference point, like someone going back to the place where they met the person and telling oneself that, for me, this is really important (…) It's there I most feel myself; instead of visiting (…) a grave or looking at the sky, even if I do that sometimes (…) because it's easier sitting at home (…). It's really all the memories for me, it's like a memory (…) as soon as I forget his voice a little, as soon as I forget his way of looking, I go back to it and it reminds me straight away" (Hervé, barman, age 27). Thus, while SNSs give rise to fresh forms of ritual

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17    www.paradisblanc.com/amandine-blet. Accessed 03 Dec 2015.

they nonetheless complement others: Hervé (ibid.) described how he combined his memorial practices for his late friend—sharing music with him on the deceased's Facebook page: "my ritual is sharing music with him"—and expressed his thoughts and words at a personal altar he had built for his friend in the hallway of his flat. Other respondents described how the deceased person's groups of friends, while still updating their Facebook page, carry on organizing different events for him or her: wakes or evenings for sharing memories, particularly on the deceased's birthday or death anniversary.

## Communicating with the deceased person and connecting with the "afterlife" in the social networking age

Ultimately, while online social platforms facilitate communication with the living, they also make it easier to communicate with the dead (Odom et al. 2010; Walter et al. 2011; Georges 2013) and redefine ties. If the death of a loved one creates a feeling of rupture, SNSs can serve as a transition to physically separate oneself from the dead, or even maintain a continuity, which may take different forms depending on whether or not the death was expected. When future death is certain, the dying can continue to communicate through their Facebook page and prepare their entourage for their moment of death. For example, one Internet user who had posted messages on Facebook until one month before his death had chosen the image of a brain split into two for his profile picture, as if to convey his physical deterioration and his approaching death. When death arrives, some see this digital communication as a way of easing its brutal effects: "I find that [Facebook] is super because it's less brutal in fact (…) he's dead but he's still here (…) it's strange but for me it's like that (…). It's not like suddenly the person's no longer there (…). I think he exists (…) She sees this page (…). He's there; it's us who make him exist (…). He didn't just die, full stop" (Claire, age 32, cultural mediator, talking about her late friend). An analysis of postings shows that mourners directly address the deceased. The permanent connection creates continuity in their exchanges, which carry on into the afterlife, but it also changes the nature of this communication. More than tributes, posted messages express a genuine communication with the deceased, a posthumous connection reflecting a relationship that could have existed had the deceased still been alive (ibid.): "I wish you a Merry Christmas from down here. I'm sending you thousands of love presents ♥" (22 December, 2014).[18] Again, following the attack against the French satirical paper, *Charlie Hebdo*, one of the deceased's sister posted: "I'm sure that you would have done it! I'm thinking

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18   http://urlz.fr/1pVf. Accessed 03 Dec 2015.

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hard of you, my Lucky" (8 January, 2015), meaning that she had no doubt that her brother would have supported the slogan "I am Charlie". Speaking of a Coca-Cola bottle bearing the first name of the deceased, another user states on the deceased's still active Facebook account: "On taking a bottle, I found you (…) Signs do exist (…) ☺". As one respondent (Claire, age 32, cultural mediator) sums up speaking of her late friend: "He's still alive on Facebook", even saying that she goes onto his page to check "how he's doing". This is real digital communication with the hereafter (Georges 2013), although communicating with the hereafter has always existed within different frameworks (ibid.). The social Web thus allows relationships with the dead to continue (Brubaker and Vertesi 2010; Brubaker and Hayes 2011; Odom et al. 2010): "These posts display a symmetry wherein the dead are assumed to still be active 'in heaven' and continuing to amass experiences" (Brubaker and Vertesi 2010, p. 3). What is most noticeable is that this communication reveals a continuum in the relationship that existed before the person's death and which is continued posthumously (Brubaker and Hayes 2011). Moreover, this explains why certain mourners view the lack of a digital existence as a handicap. In this respect, two respondents expressed their feelings of frustration after the suicide of friends with whom they had no social networking ties, remarking that they would have appreciated being able to connect with them again in cyberspace. After death, online social platforms do not appear to change the nature of the bonds that existed between the deceased and the survivor.

Finally, the role played by online social platforms in communicating with the dead (Brubaker and Vertesi 2010; Georges 2013) raises questions about faith and religion. Studies have shown that technologies constitute new media for communicating with God (Douyère 2011) and that believers continue to engage in practices using these platforms (Pew Research Center 2014), as is also shown by the posts of the religious mourners on the profiles dedicated to the deceased. These preliminary observations reveal that regardless of faith and practice,[19] communicating with the dead via SNSs suggest the persistence of a belief in eternal life, even if this is no more than digital. Hervé (barman, age 27), who regularly plays sounds in tribute to his late friend commented: "It's strange but it's as if he were still alive, he might be able to hear it, perhaps find it again, maybe Facebook is in heaven (laughter). You never know!" These new expressions of grief thus also constitute mourning rituals, which still seem to have a role to play. Traditionally, rituals were intended to "be an excellent way of stabilizing a social group affected by the death of one of its members" (Clavandier 2009)—a function supported by the Durkheim-

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19  The interviews take into account the extent to which the mourners are believers, as well as their practices.

ian notion of (mourning) rites, which allowed social bonds to be maintained within a community weakened by a momentary imbalance (Durkheim 1912 [1960]).

## 3      Discussion points and conclusion:

### Deathlogging and reconfiguring the relationship between the living and the dead in light of post-mortem digital identity

By making death visible in our everyday life and our most commonplace rituals due to the influx of messages in our electronic inboxes, SNSs are actively changing our habits and social relationships and redefining our relationship with death. By lifting the taboo of death, they have impacted mourning rituals, which have not disappeared but rather have been reconfigured. In addition, if we refer to the Durkheimian conception of ritual (Durkheim 1912 [1960]), we find the social function of ritual and its tendency to create a moral and affective community (ibid.). In this setting, the notion of "ritual" associated with these new practices proves highly appropriate. However, the novelty brought by these technologies involves the hybridization of the collective and the individual, the communal and the unique, which offer the possibility of conversations with a deceased person that are private and public at the same time. Communicating with the dead has thus taken a different turn. The hybrid nature of these spaces also raises deeper questions as to how individual and social dimensions can be articulated, and reveals some ambivalent trends. Because, whilst these platforms do not erase rituals but rather transform them, whilst they play a role in developing communal rituals and create social ties around death, they also foster individuation—that is to say, the fact of marking oneself out and existing as an individual—and intersubjectivity (Brubaker and Vertesi 2010). What is more, they encourage individualism in that the messages posted to the deceased reveal a degree of self-exhibition and heightened narcissism. In guise of conversing with the deceased, could it be that the individual is staging himself by posting messages that can be read by "everyone"? By participating in the construction of the deceased's post-mortem identity, the bereaved are also co-constructing their own identity—through their interactions with the technical platform. These technologies of the self, as Michel Foucault (1988 [1982]) called them, certainly encourage expressivity, but also for individuals "a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity wisdom, perfection, or immortality" (Foucault 1988 [1982], p. 18). As tools used for expression and relationships in the area of death, digital

memorial sites also serve as tools for measuring self. In fact, everything leads one to wonder whether the profusion of messages on some profiles does not reveal a form of individual performance and pathological narcissism (Sennett 1978 [1974]).

Another innovation in the relation to death involves the possibility of an "eternal" post-mortem digital existence and "infinite" communication with the dead, which leads some authors to refer to technospiritual relationships (Brubaker and Vertesi 2010; Odom et al. 2010). In the context of the social Web, the logic of connecting/disconnecting with eternity is taken to the extreme.

To conclude, a question that we were unable to answer within the framework of these preliminary results, and which will be the subject of the upcoming statistical survey, concerns the profiles of users of the different memorial spaces, in terms of social class, gender and age. We have already observed that users are mainly young people who are immersed in the digital world. But what about gender? Studies on gender and ICTs show that women tend to use SNSs more (Bourdeloie 2013): is this finding corroborated when it comes to death-related uses? Is the social hierarchy that exists in traditional mourning practices reproduced on the Web? All of these questions fall within the scope of our upcoming statistical survey on the uses of post-mortem digital data.

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